

ANTHONY DELONGIS: SWORDMASTER

With a lengthy career both in front and behind the camera as an actor/fight director and weapons specialist, Anthony DeLongis has worked with some of the biggest names in the entertainment business on the big screen, the small screen and the stage, including Tom Cruise, Jet Li, Tim Burton, Michelle Pfeiffer, Patrick Swayze, Yuen Woo-ping, David Carradine and so many more. He has delivered memorable performances onscreen in such projects as *The Silent Flute/Circle Of Iron*, *Jaguar Lives*, *Highlander: The Series* and more recently *Fearless* which saw him clashing swords against Jet Li. His credits behind the camera include training performers including Michelle Pfeiffer to use the bullwhip so effectively on *Batman Returns*, the swordplay for *Secondhand Lions* and so much more. *Impact's* Eastern Editor Mike Leeder delivers the first part of an in-depth interview with a true renaissance man of action cinema...

Impact: Anthony, how did you first get involved in both the acting and martial arts/swordplay side of things. And did you ever think that you would take both disciplines so far?

Anthony DeLongis: I'm currently enjoying my thirty-third year as a working show business professional. My career has encompassed continuing work as an Actor, Fight Director, Sword Master and Action Co-ordinator for film, television and the stage. Each medium poses different advantages and challenges to telling a believable action story. I approach action as dialogue with movement instead of words. Action is one of the most powerful story telling devices available to a performer and filmmaker because it can affect and involve the audience viscerally and emotionally, not just intellectually. Every actor and director will eventually face the unique demands of an action scene, often one that includes weaponry.

Such occasions can dramatically define character and drive the story in a dynamic new direction, provided the actor commands the skills to deliver a safe, exciting performance and the director knows how to take full advantage of the storytelling possibilities inherent in these opportunities. I figure the more I know, the more I can offer to the production on both sides of the camera.

The sword fascinated me even before I chose acting as my career path and life's work. The sword has existed in a wide variety of forms and shapes in every culture throughout the ancient and modern world as both a symbol of power and a dispenser of justice. At its best the sword stands for honour, integrity and responsibility, at

its worst for brutality and mayhem. But at its core, the sword is merely a tool. How you use it defines who you are and as such it is also the perfect character metaphor for whatever role you create as an actor.

Most of us in the Sword Master's profession have a passion for the history of the sword and the science of swordplay. However, most of our audience only knows what they've seen in the movies and that's often a contradictory and confusing conglomerate of misinformation. As a Sword Master you must educate as you entertain and you've got to do it without losing the momentum of the story you're telling. There are few more powerful story-telling devices than action, specifically swordplay. The opportunities are there if you have the imagination to recognize them and the skills to realize their full potential.

Choreography is a cause and effect conversation between characters in conflict. When choreographing and performing, you must discover, then believably execute the most effective, dynamic and exciting story ideas you can imagine. An audience forms instant judgments and feelings about each character based on what they see. Your artistry finds voice in the specifics of your choices and your ability to execute them clearly, dramatically and when appropriate, with a little style.

Martial arts helps me to be a better actor and acting helps my martial arts. I try to always choreograph utilizing a combative truth as the core and incorporate the best execution of practical technique possible. Obviously when telling a story, you need to broaden the action a bit to invite the audience into the conflict so they can recognize the danger to your characters and identify with that jeopardy. Within this accommodation, I try to create the precise environment for the techniques we've selected to best tell our character's story, to be combatively correct.

My martial arts journey mirrors my journey as an actor and fight director. Performers and action choreographers must be storytellers and problem solvers. We transform difficulties into opportunities that articulate character and drive our story forward. Action probes the visceral realm, the deep emotions and baggage we all carry. All that is needed to seduce an audience into actively participating in your fantasy is your own unique creative perspective, an intimate knowledge of camera angles and story presentation, and superb execution of superior technique. That's just for starters. Like a great novelist, your choices guide the audience, enticing them to supply the details that are personal and most affecting to them. They are no longer in their heads; you are tapping wellsprings of emo-

Main: A young Anthony DeLongis in rehearsals for his role in Richard Chamberlain's *Cyrano De Bergerac*.

Cutout: In costume for the same production.





tions deep in their guts. Do it well and they'll love you for it. That's the goal, that's the plan. But beware. Working in film and television is a miasma of distractions, delay, and last minute changes that you must somehow turn to your advantage. The work demands your very best and I love rising to the challenge.

I received my Bachelors' degree in Drama and Theatre Arts at California State University at Northridge. When I was struggling to learn my craft, I felt distinctly uncomfortable with my physical presence and knew this was a big problem to my effectiveness as an actor and one that I had to correct ASAP. My limited physical skills were directly impacting my character options and choices so I set about to find something that would help me connect the dots. Fencing seemed like a good skill for an actor to develop and I'd always wanted to buckle my swash like Errol Flynn in *Robin Hood* or Tyrone Power and Basil Rathbone in *The Mark Of Zorro*. I discovered I liked fencing and it liked me. I made the sabre team, competed in the Collegiate National Championships three times and won the Western Intercollegiate Saber Championship my senior year. Fencing, the martial art of the Western world, was my first martial art and it helped me to connect both mind and body into one powerful unit of expression. I learned balance, focus, finesse, strategy and the ability to put them all together to defeat an opponent or craft a multi-faceted character. My body was no longer a stranger and adversary, it was my strongest ally and my most dynamic storytelling tool.

I began my professional career as a stage actor at the Old Globe Theater in San Diego. That's also where I choreographed my first paying gig as a sword master. My performance as 'Edgar' in *King Lear* and my choreography and sword action were seen by Richard Chamberlain and director Joe Hardy, which led to my playing the Vicomte de Valvert at the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles and choreographing Richard's *Cyrano De Bergerac*. A huge opportunity and ultimately, a huge success.

I've now been a student of the bladed arts since 1968. I was blessed with two great teachers in my life: the first was Ralph Faulkner, my fencing master, known as 'The Boss,' in Hollywood. He was the teacher to the stars and truly a great man. By example, he taught me how to be a good teacher. I know what a huge effect great teachers have had on my life, sharing their skills and experience and reminding me that most of my limitations are the ones that I impose on myself. I pride myself on my ongoing determination to always be a better teacher. Later I studied Tae Kwon Do to a 1st Degree Black Belt level before finding the second greatest influence on my work. Guro Dan Inosanto. Guro Dan is an extraordinarily generous teacher. I was honoured to teach an Acting Action class for two years at the Inosanto Martial Arts Academy, with my friend and oft times sword partner Robert Chapin.

I continue to study with the best martial artists I can find. Many of them come to my ranch to share and trade knowledge. Check out some of what we offer at my ranch link at www.delongis.com/indale. I'm currently creating a combative protocol for my other favourite weapon, the bullwhip. The whip is the ultimate flexible weapon: precision, power and virtually unlimited versatility in one explosive package. The tip of the whip literally shatters the sound barrier! Hollywood has only begun to tap the potential this extraordinary tool can offer. Directors who are looking for something truly different, stylish and devastatingly effective can have it all with the bullwhip. Westerns, historical period pieces and even modern action films can all benefit from the dynamic action a whip can offer.

How did you get involved in the *Silent Flute/Circle Of Iron* movie? Were you aware that it had originally been a project developed by

Bruce Lee, James Coburn and Sterling Silliphant. Had Bruce Lee served as an influence on you in any way? What do you remember from the shoot?

I was cast as 'Morthand' in Los Angeles but didn't find out until after about the project's impressive pedigree. Like countless other martial artists, Bruce Lee was a tremendous inspiration to my studies and my work. I'd first been impressed with his performances as Kato in *The Green Hornet* and he changed the face of action movies forever with *The Big Boss*, *Fist Of Fury* and *Enter The Dragon*. As a martial student, I especially liked the way he discovered 'the ribbons of truth' from the study of a wide variety of seemingly different martial arts to distill their essence and create what was most effective for him in combat. Did you know Bruce Lee was a student of Western fencing? The more I study and learn, the more I recognize the truths that exist in all martial systems. I learned that from Bruce Lee and his student, Dan Inosanto.

The Silent Flute was my first big movie role and my first shoot on location. I was a lowly Tae Kwon Do Brown Belt at the time and I remember the long plane ride with just about every martial arts teacher and Black Belt I'd ever heard of on the same flight... Our first sequence was the big tournament in an ancient Roman amphitheatre and all the martial arts guys got to strut their stuff. It was quite a mixture of styles. Veteran actor Roddy McDowell was the tournament director, and meeting him was a real thrill. Although my skills were limited and my style at the time was very linear, the producers and director liked what I was doing and asked me to put on a big fake nose and lots of makeup to battle David Carradine in his first appearance as the blind martial arts master. We shot six days a week for a month in Israel and it was an education, both as an actor and as an American traveling abroad. This was my first opportunity to work with David Carradine. We've since



worked on *The Warrior* & *The Sorceress* in Argentina and *Kung Fu: The Legend Continues* in Canada. David taught me the importance of making the most of my time on screen. A valuable lesson for a fledgling performer

With our exhausting six days a week schedule we had a one day whirl wind tour of both Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Not nearly enough time to see these holy cities but I have memories I'll never forget. Having no real knowledge of this part of the world outside of movies the experience was nothing like what I expected, it was much better. After a full day of sight seeing in the old city of Jerusalem, I went out for Chinese food and met Johnny Cash and his wife Roseanne, who were on a pilgrimage. They asked me to join them for din-

ner and a lovelier time with two wonderful people I can't recall. I've since been fortunate enough to travel and film in many locations around the world and I've ridden horses (my other great passion) in ten countries on five continents. Have skills, will travel.

Your next project was producer Sandy Howard's *Jaguar Lives* which introduced Karate champion Joe Lewis to the movie world as a globe trotting high kicking secret agent. You play 'Brett', fellow agent and the best friend of Lewis' character and turn out to be the bad guy in the end. What can you tell us about your experiences on the film and working with Joe Lewis?

I'd first met Joe on *Circle Of Iron/The Silent Flute* when he was doubling for the Chord character for some pick up shots on the film. Joe seemed pleased with my abilities and shortly afterward producer Sandy Howard tapped me to play Joe's best friend and ultimately betrayer in his official screen debut *Jaguar Lives*. Joe was great and a real inspiration to me as he really put it all into his debut, we had a great cast including Donald Pleasance, Christopher Lee (I've starred in two films with him and we've still yet to meet), Joseph Wiseman, Woody Strode, Barbara Bach and me, not bad for a second film. I remember Joe had a heavy bag hanging from a support beam punched through a hole in his room's ceiling. He was really in incredible

Main: Anthony DeLongis in *The Warrior* & *the Sorceress*.

Below, left: *The Silent Flute*

condition for the film, really cut, and that takes a lot of hard work. He followed a very strict training regime and I had even more admiration for him after struggling to keep up with him on a training run through the streets of Madrid. I do remember that he got frustrated early on because he couldn't shed the last few pounds he wanted, and it wasn't until he discovered that the bottled water he was drinking in great quantities to keep hydrated was 'agua con azucar' and full of sugar and changed to sugarless water that the last few pounds melted away.

I will always remember our final showdown when my double life is revealed, and these two former best friends must battle to the death atop a literally crumbling-beneath-our-feet medieval castle in El Monte, Spain. Joe really carried me in that fight, but I did my best to be a worthy antagonist. Our final day was sixteen grueling hours and we got to the point where we were making up the choreography as we went along. Joe would chase me along the ramparts and we'd improvise as we went. At one point Joe started grabbing bits of chipped masonry and throwing it at me. It added a lot of realism to the scene as I was really desperately trying to avoid chunks of brick hitting me in the head.

Later in the day Joe's friend, renowned martial arts master Al Dacascos flew in from Germany to visit. Joe, Al and myself took a photo of the three of us in a low crouch on the castle walls. Some years later when I took over and re-choreographed the live Conan show at Universal Studios, I had the pleasure of working with Al's son Mark Dacascos. I brought in the photo one day to show Mark and he says, "I had that picture on my wall when I was a kid." Thanks, a lot. Mark and I worked together again on *Double Dragon* and he's an amazing talent and a superb martial artist.

Now in-between leading and featured roles you've also worked extensively as a sword master/choreographer on a variety of projects. How did you find yourself drawn into that side of filming and is it something you enjoy, teaching and choreographing as opposed to simply performing yourself?

I love performing and I love the added dimension physical action brings to any role I play. But I'll jump at the chance to partner anyone, even if I'm doubling for another actor. Usually I'm partnering someone I've trained, so they trust me and know they can go all out in their performance without worrying about hurting me. Whether I'm performing or training and choreographing, I like to contribute to the success of whatever project I'm involved with, whether in front of or behind the cameras. I'm still involved in helping the director to realize his vision and the actor to fully inhabit his character. I choose action elements that best tell that specific story and that is a hugely rewarding challenge. It's good to be part of the team and making movies, television or even live theatre is a team effort.

You've shot films and TV series in all manner of locations, what have been some of your favourite places to

shoot and why?

Israel for *The Silent Flute*. I felt like I was walking through history on blood soaked sands. Argentina for *The Warrior & The Sorceress*. I'd never been to South America before and it was a real adventure. I worked with some wonderful people, discovered the tango and yerba mate, the drink of the gauchos. Capetown, South Africa for *The Adventures Of Sinbad*. The show was fun and I they let me ride and train my horse anytime I wasn't filming. He took to my cracking the whip off his back very quickly and I got to ride everyday at the Cape of Good Hope. I've since also ridden at Cape Horn at the tip of South America. How cool is that? Bulgaria was tons of fun and had some very cool locations. The Czech Republic offered ancient castles and Prague, whose town square has architecture from every age since the 14th century. Jordan had the best Roman ruins I've ever seen outside of Ephesus, Turkey. We also filmed at one of Suleiman the Great's twelfth century castles overlooking the old Silk Road. Finally we shot in Petra, the lost city with its rose coloured stone and its serpentine entrance through the winding cliffs carved by centuries of erosion from wind and water. It was the hiding place of the Grail in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and really exists and is even better in person. I'll never forget my ride through the high narrow walls of the sique after sundown with only the light of the moon and evening star filtering through the cliffs high above to light my way. Magic.

Some of your hardest experiences on location and why?

Every location has its challenge. There are few places less user friendly than a movie set, unless it is a movie location. Wind, rain, cold, bad footing, long days of waiting to film your scene with countless delays and then the inevitable race to make the day or lose the scene entirely. That's all part of the job.

Three that come to mind are fighting Joe Lewis in *Jaguar Lives* atop the ruined parapets of a Spanish castle some 60 feet in the air, trying to avoid getting too close to the crumbling edges and knowing the next move is a foot sweep from Joe. *Sinbad: Battle Of The Dark Knights* - fighting Richard Grieco with steel swords at the edge of a cliff in Petra, Jordan. Again it was a drop of about eight stories to the rocks below if we made a mistake. The final move required a disarm at the edge of the cliff and I had to make sure neither Richard nor myself accompanied the sword over the edge. It's important to remember that if you don't get it on film, it's not a stunt, just an unfortunate incident. The fight in the rain in Paris for the *Duende* episode of *Highlander: The Series* was also pretty hard going, but more about that later.

Mike Leader's exclusive interview with Anthony Delongis continues in next month's *Impact*. In part two, Anthony discusses working on such projects as *He Man & The Masters Of The Universe* with Dolph Lundgren, training Michelle Pfeiffer for *Batman Returns*, battling Adrian Paul in *Highlander: The Series*, and his work on a number of other projects including *Queen Of Swords* and *Secondhand Lions*.

MIKE LEADER



Top: Sun bronzed on location for *Jaguar Lives*.
Centre: The climactic fight scene of *Jaguar Lives*.
Bottom: *The Warrior & The Sorceress*.

"Our final day was sixteen grueling hours and we got to the point where we were making up the choreography as we went along. Joe would chase me along the ramparts and we'd improvise as we went. At one point Joe started grabbing bits of chipped masonry and throwing it at me. It added a lot of realism to the scene as I was really desperately trying to avoid chunks of brick hitting me in the head."